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Damming the free flow of information

By DANIEL S. GREENBERG

ONE IS TEMPTED to dismiss the Reagan administration's growing penchant for security checks, polygraph tests and other paraphernalia of secrecy as midterm antics common to all recent presidencies.

But it should be recognized that the current attempts to control information about government go far beyond the ineffective efforts of the past. In fact, they reflect a systematic design that would take government into areas of information control that have heretofore been considered immune to official intrusion.

Bits and pieces of this design have been set into place over the past two years. Thus, Pentagon employees suspected of undesirable leaks, as distinguished from the gusher of officially sanctioned favorable leaks, must submit to lie-detector tests or lose their jobs.

In addition, this administration has abandoned the public's right to know as a criterion to be considered in classifying information. Under the new Reagan policies, doubts about classification are to be resolved by going to a higher level of secrecy, thus reversing past policy.

Finally, the administration has warned university scientists that they are subject to prosecution under the Export Administration Act if they circulate scientific data that, though unclassified, is deemed to be "sensitive."

These items add up to a formidable package of restraints on the flow of information, but they pale beside the presidential secrecy order signed March 11 that requires all senior government officials with access to "sensitive compartmented information" to agree to prepublication review of future writings.

If the directive had been in effect in recent years, it would apply to articles and commentaries that

numerous officials from past administrations, among them Henry Kissinger, Harold Brown and Stansfield Turner, regularly produce on strategic issues. To stay within the law, they would be required to submit book manuscripts, newspaper commentaries and interviews for government approval prior to publication.

THE PRESIDENTIAL directive is so sweeping, according to Floyd Abrams, the attorney who argued the Pentagon Papers case for The New York Times, that former officials would be subject to prepublication governmental review for the rest of their lives.

It is important to recognize that the Reagan administration is not only deadly serious in its designs but that, in a short time, it has come a long way in implementing them.

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